

The Gaithersburg Day Labor Issue
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We Have an Issue That We Have To Deal With!

By the spring of 2004 we (the church and some community people) realized that we had to deal with an issue in regard to the day laborers. When the Hispanic Catholic Center moved from the shopping center at 117 North Frederick Avenue they left behind a number of men (12-15) who regularly gathered early in the morning attempting/hoping to find work. The reason they did not move with the Catholic Center to East Deer Park is that this is the location where those needing workers were accustomed to stopping by.

Originally, Grace Church was confronted with men urinating on the church lawn or bushes, dropping trash in the parking lot and along the church property and drinking alcoholic beverages that they had obtained from the adjacent shopping center on North Frederick Avenue. In order to deal with this issue we opened our doors (they are generally open from morning to night) and encouraged the men to use our indoor restroom, urged them to put trash in a trash bin and requested that no alcoholic beverages be used on church property and in the shopping center parking lot. Once communication was established (language is a serious issue) things generally went well. We did have two incidents of disorderly conduct and the church called the Gaithersburg Police on both occasions and filed a complaint.

At the same time several of us made a decision to gather informally in the church fellowship hall early Friday mornings to talk about how we might deal with the growing number of men seeking employment (by this time the number of day laborers had increased to 25-35 men daily). These included myself, the pastor of Camino de Vita congregation, pastor from Episcopal Church of the Ascension, City of Gaithersburg Police Department, Montgomery County Police Department, and City of Gaithersburg representatives. We met every week and added to our numbers from Montgomery County officials, Montgomery Works, Casa de Maryland, Gaithersburg Gazette, and the list goes on. The main issue that we continued to face was who is supervising the men who gathered daily (seven days a week) and what is the short term and long term solution to the issue that we face?

Where Do We Go From Here?

Our early Friday morning weekly meeting group continued to grow until we averaged about 20 + city, county and concerned representatives. We added several day laborers who joined us from time to time to talk about their needs and their hopes for their families, security and employment. Through the County Police we were able to lengthen the time the men could stay in the shopping center parking lot from 7:00 am to about 9:00 am and we eventually lengthened this to 9:30 a.m. The police departments from both the city and county were a great help in coming through the parking lot at unannounced times, bringing a Spanish speaking officer to talk to the men and sharing with the day laborers our "rules" and then urging them to disperse around 9:30 a.m. We had almost no negative incidents with the day laborers. I walked the church property and the shopping center parking lot just about every day to greet the men, introduce myself and tried to establish some form of relationship.

Our Rules

We developed some "rules" for the day laborers that included (1) use the church restrooms, do not urinate on the grass or bushes (2) do not throw paper on church property or in the shopping center but use the trash cans (3) do not "cat-call" at women or shout at people passing by (4) do not bring any alcoholic beverages onto the property and report anyone who does (5) remember that you are a guest and you are on private property. Once rules were explained and communicated to the men we had fewer and fewer problems.

Documented or Un-Documented?

While the immigration issue was raised at most of our meetings and we were very concerned with the Federal Government policy (if they have one), we did not feel that we wanted to differentiate between those who had papers (legal) and those who did not have papers (illegal). The overriding issue was humanitarian concern. The men were already here and were at our "door step" and we needed to find solutions not simply just talk about issues. Montgomery County had adopted the policy of simply "not asking" about documented or un-documented workers, simply how to keep order, how to find daily work for the men and how to find a long term solution.

By Fall of 2004

By early fall of 2004 I asked the Assistant City Manager and the Mayor of Gaithersburg if we could move our meetings from the church fellowship hall to the Gallery in City Hall and they willingly agreed. Our "ad hoc" task force continued to meet on a monthly basis and we often grew to 30 + people. The meeting were never closed or in secret. Our doors were always open. We assumed (probably wrongly) that since the Gaithersburg Gazette was covering the meeting and publishing articles almost every week that everyone knew what we were doing. There were two main concerns: (1) what was a "short term solution" and how were we going to do deal

with winter and cold weather coming on and (2) what was a "long term solution" that possibly might include a day labor center in Gaithersburg that might be modeled after the one that already existing in Montgomery County.

Grace Church, through its Trustees, offered to continue to open its doors five days a week (Monday through Friday) to the men and on those days hire a person who could make coffee and offer food and warmth. On Saturday and Sundays the church would be open for warmth and restrooms. By December, we hired a person through the Camino de Vita congregation and paid from church outreach funds \$200 per week. Our hours were about 7:00 am to 8:15 a.m. in our fellowship hall and then from 8:15 to 9:30 a.m. in our Owen Hall. Toward the end of the winter we received a financial gift from the City of Gaithersburg to help out with a couple of weeks and also a financial gift for a week from the Episcopal Church of the Ascension. We made it through the winter months without negative incident.

By Spring of 2005

The informal ad hoc task force continued to meet monthly and we took a couple of directions: (1) that we needed to move ahead with the helpful support of the City of Gaithersburg and Montgomery County in finding a location for a day labor center. (2) that we needed to find ways for the men to move from being a day laborer to being a more permanent part of the employed community. Groups like Montgomery Works (Lake Forest Mall) and Montgomery College were a help in this area and continued to push us to find a more permanent work solutions beyond a day labor center. (3) we need to continue to supervise the men gathering in the church/shopping center parking lot to avoid any negative incidents.

We felt that we had moved about as far as we could in regard to #1, a location for a day labor center, and we turned this issue over to the City of Gaithersburg and Montgomery County real estate departments to see if they could find a suitable location in the area where we could establish a day labor center.

It is interesting that in just about every meeting concern was raised about "protecting" the community or neighborhood when the day labor center was established. I remember the Mayor voicing concern several times about making sure we had separation/security from the day labor center wherever it might be established and the neighborhood or community. In hind-site although we tried to share honest concern about the neighborhood we should have actually invited the neighbors to sit in with us. At that time, though, we did not have a final destination for a center. Which neighbors should have been invited? We also knew that the Gaithersburg Gazette was covering all of our meetings and articles were appearing in the Wednesday edition on a regular basis.

The city and county came back with a recommendation of an unused water treatment building at the corner of Rt. 355 and Brookes Avenue. The access would be through Olde Town and we could control who came and went and we could provide security for the residents who lived on Brookes Avenue and surrounding areas. Although I felt the building was small we decided to move ahead since it was at least a location and a temporary solution and possibly the building could be expanded at a later time. Although no contract had been made by Montgomery County with Casa de Maryland it was assumed by some of us since they had a good track record they would be the group that would supervise the center. The City of Gaithersburg agreed to fix up the building and Montgomery County agreed to get a lease and hire a supervising group.

It All Fell Apart!

When the Gaithersburg Gazette announced the chosen location, there was a deep negative concern from many of the residents of Walker Avenue and Brookes Avenue. Some residents felt that this was not a desirable location, it was too close to an existing neighborhood where there were children and that the neighbors had not been invited to take part in the selection process. Some neighbors even felt that the decision had been made in secret sessions or behind closed doors. The City of Gaithersburg immediately pulled back, and with the city in retreat, Montgomery County continued to offer support but pulled back on this location and at this time saying that it was apparent that the City of Gaithersburg simply was not ready to move ahead. The city had a major community meeting in the fellowship hall of Grace Church where the Mayor apologized for the way things were handled and then made a decision that no more meetings would be held except at City Hall and with television present so there would be no hint of secrecy. Many of the city and community residents share their personal concerns including concerns about immigration both here and nationally.

The Official City of Gaithersburg Task Force

At this point, the informal community task force just about stopped meeting. I believe we had one or two meetings and wondered how the city would form a day labor task force, and what would this task force really do and if the city was really committed to this serious issue, and how we would move ahead to deal with daily supervision and also with winter coming, how we would deal with the cold weather and the day laborers.

The Coming Winter of 2005/2006

Grace Church agreed that it would once again open its doors to the day laborers in the winter of 2005/2006. Our Trustees and Sr. Pastor met with city officials and county officials in December and came to an agreement that the county would pay for one or two persons to supervise the day laborers in the church building from 6:15 a.m. to

9:30 a.m. The church did not want a de-facto day labor center in our building but was willing to have the church building open for warmth, coffee and food and restrooms but we also needed supervision. In December we received a phone call from the county saying that the money that had been allocated by the Montgomery County Council was "only" for a day labor center and could not be used for supervision purposes.

At that point the Administrative Board of Grace Church agreed to hire a supervisor person through the Camino de Vita congregation to supervise the men and we would pay \$200 per week for this person. This has been done since the first of January. At this point we have had good results with this ministry. We will continue this ministry until the end of March when the weather gets better. We also hope that the City Task Force will come up with a recommendation to the Mayor and City Council that will provide for a more permanent solution by the first part of April and that the Mayor and Council will seriously consider a positive solution.

Just about every day I walk the church grounds and the shopping center parking lot, and on a regular basis Pastor David Rocha also comes into the building and walks the property, along with "somewhat" regular police supervision. I believe supervision and communication are critically important at this time until someone comes up with a more permanent solution if they ever do.

Personally, I was very pleased that the Mayor, in the recent State of the City message mentioned the day labor issue as one that still confronts us and needs a solution.

Some Questions or Concerns

Is the City of Gaithersburg really committed to finding both a short term and long term solution to the issue of the day laborers or is this a "hot potato" that needs to be dropped or hidden away or handed over for Montgomery County to handle?

Is anyone really concerned about the supervision or lack of supervision on the church property or shopping center seven days a week? Who is presently responsible for supervision?

Does anyone realize that about 20% or more of the city residents are Hispanic/Latino?

Is the day laborer task force committed to finding a solution or have members already made up their minds about what to do or not to do?

Have any of the members of the city task force actually walked the church property or the shopping center property and talked to or had conversation with any of the men who gather every morning? Putting a face on the issue is important.

Is it true that a member of the City Council actually said at a recent dinner that no matter what the task force does, the city will drag its feet on this controversial issue?

Will we go into summer, fall and winter with exactly the same situation that we now have in existence and simply hope for the best or have more meetings?

Is it true, as one person recently said, "this is a problem that we have to solve!" Are these men a problem or are they a